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ABSTRACT

English education continues to be threatened by standards for research, measurement, and evaluation that ignore the nature of the discipline and devalue teachers' practices. The dominant models for assessing the effectiveness of English teachers reflect assumptions taken from quantitative social sciences or, in the case of models of accountability, from business--this in the era when social sciences themselves (and even sciences) are being profoundly influenced by research in language, rhetoric, and culture. Students' grades, evaluations of teachers, teacher certification, and curriculum reveal domination by ideology and standards belonging to other epistemologies. Rhetoric could be used to construct a discipline of English studies that validates the local knowledge of teachers, yet also places this knowledge in a larger field of inquiry, the cultural memory. (KEH)

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ENGLISH AND EDUCATION RHETORIC AS A MODEL FOR PRACTICAL RESEARCH

Many in the discipline of English have found that teaching is newly problematic--and this could, with luck, move us toward a new respect for what teachers know. In the English Coalition conference, the two literacy conferences sponsored by MLA, the recent conference on pedagogy at the University of Pennsylvania, in the arguments about writing, cultural literacy, and the profession that appear in our journals, from Language Arts to College English, we see an emerging consensus. The concept of teaching as something separate from theorizing, from research and scholarship, is under challenge. Is teaching merely a technique for reproducing cultural memory, passing along information--nothing more than method, as E. D. Hirsch and Lynn Cheney argue? No, English teachers at all levels increasingly agree. Teaching is actively involved in the production of cultural knowledge.

This cultural knowledge does not exist outside of the human conversation. If we don't understand how students are empowered to learn language, to learn culture, and to become participants in culture, we do not understand what we mean by knowledge in the discipline of English. For cultural knowledge is, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz reminds us, "local knowledge," situational knowledge--knowledge that requires a "feel for immediacies" (168).

The view of the humanities implied by E.D. Hirsch's "cultural literacy," by Lynn Cheney's notion of the humanities

as cultural memory, and by traditional standardized tests and top-down prescriptions for curriculum does not take into account how cultural knowledge is actually acquired. The problem with thinking of English as the study of great works in our cultural memory is not only that we've forgotten a good many voices--those of women, AfroAmericans, Native Americans, Chicanos--our rich multiplicity of cultures. There is also, as Janet Emig has reminded us, a tendency to forget the problem of learning. The idea that teachers just pass along as faithfully as possible the knowledge they have inherited suggests that memory can and should be passed along unaltered by those who mediate its history. This view of the way cultural memory works is psychologically, politically, and ideologically naive.

Opposed to this view of knowledge as transfer is a view of knowledge as embedded in and growing out of practice. This view of knowledge challenges the conventional hierarchical relationship of theory and practice, challenges oppressive institutional structures that too often privilege university professors and language arts coordinators while devaluing classroom teachers. This view of knowledge instead envisions theory as a field of practices, and theorizing as an activity that might take shape in a scholarly article but might also appear in a seven-year-old's reflections about how she is writing a story. Teaching, this view of knowledge emphasizes, occurs whenever and wherever individuals learn culture. So the very foundation of scholarship and research in the discipline of English can not be separated

from an understanding of pedagogy.

This view of pedagogy as itself productive of knowledge might best be described as rhetorical. Rhetoric is a form of basic research in the humanities because it allows us to think about how social interactions construct what we know and how writing mediates learning. Since "rhetoric" is subject to several interpretations, we need to define this term carefully. When we refer to rhetoric, we are referring first to the discipline established in 5th century BC Greece by Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates, and others--a discipline concerned not only with the art of public discourse but also with the education of future citizens. Over the centuries rhetoric did of course change, as western culture changed. Nevertheless, rhetoric has generally assumed that theory, practice, and pedagogy are interwoven, inseparable, part of the same enterprise.

Rhetoric has also generally emphasized the human, the situational: as Michael Halloran argues, "the one feature of discourse that has remained a constant emphasis of rhetorical theories from ancient Greece to the present is that it is addressed" (p. 621). Unlike formal logic, then, which traditionally aspires to decontextualized, mathematical precision, rhetoric is situation based, is grounded in what Lloyd Bitzer calls "the rhetorical situation." As such, rhetoric is inevitably concerned with the contingent, with values and beliefs.

Rhetoric has not always been recognized as contributing to

productive scholarship or practice. As recently as the mid 1970s--and perhaps even later--most scholars in the humanities (and certainly those in the social sciences) would have applauded I. A. Richards' 1936 condemnation of rhetoric as "the dreariest and least profitable part of the waste that the unfortunate travel through in Freshman English" (3). During the last ten years, however, scholars in a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have found that rhetoric suddenly, in Richards' terms, "minister(s) to important needs" (3).

The scope of the broad interdisciplinary "turn to rhetoric" may be suggested by conferences with titles like "The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences" and articles and books such as Christopher Norris' The Deconstructive Turn: Essays in the Rhetoric of Philosophy, James Boyd White's Heracles' Bow: Essays on the Rhetoric and Poetics of Law, Donald McCloskey's The Rhetoric of Economics, and Richard Brown's "Theories of Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Theories: Toward a Political Phenomenology of Sociological Truth."

At the risk of oversimplifying, we would like to categorize recent reawakenings of interest in rhetoric as reflecting two broad impulses, both involved in the question of pedagogy: the impulse to know and the impulse to act powerfully in society. The first of these has sometimes been characterized as a "turn to interpretation" or "epistemological revolution." This turn or revolution is reflected by the effort radically to question, in Richard Rorty's terms, "Descartes's attempt to make the world

safe for clear and distinct ideas and Kant's to make it safe for synthetic a priori truths" (165).

Opposing foundationalist projects which endeavor to locate universal laws of reason, a number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have rejected the positivist assumption that "the explanatory method used by natural sciences should be the model for intelligibility in all cases where humans attempt to develop valid knowledge" (Phelps, 7). Instead, they have looked to rhetoric to develop a new "understanding of understanding" (Geertz, Local Knowledge, p. 5). Those guided by a contextualist, constructivist, or intersubjectivist vision of knowledge--these terms have all been used to describe the broad epistemological revolution we have been describing--establish discourse as both master trope and subject of investigation and view reason as essentially rhetorical (even though not all use the word "rhetoric" to describe this new understanding.)

Thus rhetoric is being called upon or invoked by theorists in a number of fields, including English, and it has the potential for offering a site (as it has in moments in its past) for a genuinely interdisciplinary, critical theory and practice--a theory and practice that would, for instance, remove conceptions of literacy from the margins (where functional literates are supposed to reside, next to the homeless) and place them at the center of cultural debate. Such a revisioning challenges us to redefine our discipline's goals and methods. However, English educators have so far only partially begun to participate in this

project of reconceiving and reconstructing the human sciences. And English Education continues to be threatened by standards for research, measurement, and evaluation that ignore the nature of the discipline and devalue teachers' practices.

Far from acknowledging that classroom practices might be taken seriously, the dominant models for assessing the effectiveness of English teachers reflect assumptions taken from quantitative social sciences, like sociology or psychology, or even, in the case of models of accountability, from business. This in the era we have just described, when the social sciences themselves--and even the sciences--are being profoundly influenced by research in language, rhetoric, and culture. Though ethnography has rapidly become a favored mode of research for English Education, and though teachers are increasingly being encouraged to see themselves as "teacher researchers" (even as the knowledge their practice produces is devalued through its definition as "intuition" [Myers, 5]), the most powerful moments of teaching practice--the moments that reveal ideology at work--are dominated by standards that belong to other epistemologies altogether. Here is a list of such moments:

Students' grades

Are they based on a mutual, long-term assessment of the student's development, and the careful professional judgment of a teacher well-acquainted with both the discipline and the context (such as portfolio grading aims for)? Or are they based on a fragmented list of "behavioral objectives,"

measured by multiple-choice quizzes, numbers of worksheets done correctly, pieces of reading done out of context rather than whole texts, or papers and projects done in isolation and graded according to a so-called norm that has little access to any sense of the rhetorical situation?

Evaluations of Teachers

Are they based on the teacher's contributions as understood in the rhetorical situation of a particular school at a particular time? By someone who knows the discipline of English, or has solicited evaluations from peers? Or are they determined by mass-produced evaluation instruments and standardized test results? The worst fear of teachers is that mass testing of students will be used to judge teachers, even though the assessment instruments warn that they are not valid for such purposes. To what extent is the entire process of evaluation rendered futile by the stand-off between teachers who defend their isolation, troublesome and disabling though it may be, for fear of being made vulnerable to the violence of inappropriate evaluation instruments?

Teacher certification

In spite of widespread critiques, standardized tests like the NTE are being used to certify teachers in a number of states. The test results suggest serious cultural bias which works against minorities. But how

could any test of language and literature--of literacy--avoid bias? From a rhetorical point of view, the very notion of a standardized literacy test begs the question that needs continuously to be negotiated: what constitutes "literacy" at this particular time, in this particular place? Arguments about bilingual education and "English First" as well as cultural literacy suggest how difficult the question may be. Using a test like the NTE puts all the decision-making power about these most fractious debates into the hands of the profit-making Educational Testing Service, and outside democratic processes.

Curriculum

Who has the authority and power to determine the curriculum? Currently decisions about public school curricula are frequently made without reference either to the current best knowledge of the discipline of English or the knowledge of practicing teachers. A rhetorically grounded discipline of English Education would recognize the need for professional and local knowledge generated through collaborative inquiry on the part of teachers. Instead, public school curriculum is determined by decontextualized and fragmented charts of goals and objectives. These formats are apt to distract English teachers from planning the kind of sustained work on texts and

projects that develops students' rhetorical knowledge.

Reflecting on moments such as these has helped us to better understand the origin of teachers' often-noted resistance to theory. Governed by an epistemology that not only separates theory and practice but devalues practice, teachers lack the authority--the credibility or ethos--to argue effectively for their own knowledge. Like students who can only submit to or refuse the banking model of education, teachers can only accede to or refuse the "knowledge" offered by theory.

This resistance accounts for, among other things, the difficult encounters between professors in English Departments who want to teach literary and rhetorical theory, and the apparent anti-intellectualism of public school teachers who challenge the usefulness of such speculation. And if knowledge is defined as only that which can be tested and measured, then everything else--including the humanities (talking about ideas, writing arguments, reading literature)--is, like practice, devalued. A rhetorical model for evaluation would ground teacher research in English in a sense of the ongoing conversation of the discipline.

We recognize that what we are suggesting is a major challenge to our educational institutions. We recognize that we are talking about an institution of knowledge, a set of practices and procedures embedded in the ways the schools do business with the public and the state. If teachers' reasoned critiques and complaints could easily change the practices of accountability

and of evaluation, they'd have changed already. If theory were simply a set of immaterial ideas about knowledge, the rhetorical turn might win out over the old paradigm. But theory is embedded in practice and so the practices of education need to change, to acknowledge a rhetorical foundation for the discipline of English.

Such an acknowledgement properly leads not to answers but to questions--questions that can help us critique current distinctions between theory and practice: 1) Why has the hegemonic nature of the relationship of theory and practice been the "purloined letter" of our field--lying in plain sight but nevertheless invisible; 2) Why have some professors of English, particularly at the university level, found it so easy to dismiss teachers' insistence on the importance of practice as anti-intellectual; 3) Whose interests do current models of research in education serve--and why do these models make it difficult to ask these questions?

For us, these questions implicitly pose a challenge to English teachers at all levels. How can we work together--as teachers at the English Coalition Conference worked together--to imagine or construct a discipline of English studies that validates the rhetorically situated or local knowledge of teachers, yet also places this knowledge in a larger field of inquiry, the cultural memory itself? Rhetoric, with its historical depth and richness of tradition, offers one possible grounding for such a project.